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Authorship and the Computer: An Anonymous Piece of Late Medieval Devotional Literature

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The project described in this paper was undertaken as a result of the author's Ph.D. research into the writings of an early sixteenth-century Bridgettine and author of devotional literature, Richard Whitford. (1) Work on the establishment of his canon prompted the author of this paper to begin investigations on the ways in which the computer might be used in the establishment of authorship. Obviously, it is not always necessary to resort to the computer when questions of authorship arise. Frequently, discrepancies in style, preoccupation, dating and other textual characteristics are so glaring that it becomes relatively easy to say that a particular text was not written by a particular author. It is much more difficult to prove the authenticity of a text or to come to a verdict when disparities exist side-by-side with tantalising similarities.

In the case of *A Looking Glace for the Religious* (Syon Ms.18), a work sometimes attributed to Whitford, (2) it proved impossible to show conclusively through the use of traditional methods whether or not Whitford was the author of the work. *A Looking Glace for the Religious*, the anonymous piece of late medieval devotional literature mentioned in the title of this paper, is written in English and appears to exist in a unique manuscript copy held in the library of Syon Abbey in South Brent, Devon (England). The extent of its connection with the Abbey is unknown. The work is 116 pages in length (3) and is undated. The handwriting is tidy and legible and covers both sides of the page. It appears to be a seventeenth-century hand.

The work itself, however, is probably not of the seventeenth century. Syon Ms. 18 is definitely the copy of an earlier work. Frequently, deleted words in the text reappear a few lines further on, indicating that the scribe's eye had slipped and that he had lost his place in the work that he was copying rather than that he was composing the work as he wrote.

When, then, was the treatise written? Its contents suggest that it is of the late medieval or Tudor period for two reasons. The text does not contain

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any characteristics of Counter-Reformation devotional literature (4) but does contain a distinctly pre-Reformation feature, namely, its detailed, deeply-felt criticisms of unworthy religious.

A Looking Glace has been attributed to Richard Whitford.

Whitford was probably born in the 1470's in North Wales. He entered the University of Cambridge in the 1490's and was elected a Fellow of Queens' College some years later. In 1498, he became chaplain, tutor and confessor to William Blount, fourth Lord Mountjoy. He spent some time in Paris with Lord Mountjoy, where he met Erasmus. By 1500, Whitford was back at Cambridge. At some time before his entry into religious life, he may have been chaplain to Bishop Foxe of Winchester. At an unknown date, he entered the English Bridgettine House of Syon Abbey and remained there until it was dissolved in 1539. Records do not indicate whether or not he accepted the King's supremacy but they do show that he was given a pension of eight pounds a year by the Crown upon the dissolution of Syon Abbey. The last recorded payment of his pension is April 5, 1542 and he probably died shortly thereafter. (5)

Whitford was the author of a significant number of works of devotional literature which appear to have survived only in the form of early printed books. These include: A werke for householders, The Pype, or tonne, of the lyfe of perfection, A dialoge or comunicacion...For preparaci6n vnto howselynge, A dayly exercyse and experyence of dethc and Of Patience. He also translated the Rule of St. Augustine, the Martyrology used at Syon, an anonymous Golden Epistle, a section of one of the homilies of St. John Chrysostom, two crossrows attributed to St. Bonaventure, an anonymous treatise entitled A worke of dyuers impedimentes and lettes of perfection and a treatise attributed to St. Isidore entitled An instructyon to auoyde and eschewe vices. These writings arc of a very conservative, orthodox nature and in them, Whitford reveals himself to have been a self-conscious adversary of Lutheran tenets. He aimed to convince his readers to remain within the Church and sought, through the means of instruction, to improve the quality of religious observance and lay devotion.

Is Whitford the author of A Looking Glace for the Religious? All the works generally accepted as authentic Whitford writings (with one exception) contain at least one of two characteristics. Whitford either names himself somewhere in the text as the author of the work or refers to himself as the author of that particular work in another of his writings. A Looking Glace contains neither of these characteristics. Glanmor Williams (6) also suggests that a distinctive trait of Whitford's writings is his use of the archaic form of the third person plural present (i.e. they ben, they done). A Looking Glace does not contain this feature either.

At first glance, Whitford does not seem likely to have been the author of A Looking Glace. Upon closer inspection, however, his candidature can-

not be dismissed so easily. Some of the more unusual words found in his writings appear in *A Looking Glace*. As in the case of most of Whitford's works, *A Looking Glace* was written in answer to a request. The author, like Whitford, professes himself unworthy of the task. At the end of the work, the author bids his readers farewell and requests them to »praye for me your wretched brother. Amen«. (7) Whitford too frequently refers to himself in his writings as »the wretch of Syon« or »the wretched brother of Syon«. As in the case of Whitford's works, the tone of the *Looking Glace* author is one of reassurance and encouragement. Like Whitford, the author of *A Looking Glace* is scrupulous in acknowledging his sources. The phraseology employed by the author of *A Looking Glace* is frequently similar to that found in Whitford's writings.

Themes and preoccupations similar to those found in Whitford may also be found in *A Looking Glace*. Finally, both Whitford and the *Looking Glace* author make frequent use of simile, alliteration and dialogue between the author and the reader. Traditional means have not been able to establish conclusively whether or not Whitford is the author of *A Looking Glace*. *A Looking Glace* and texts by Whitford are, therefore, being entered on a VAX 11/780 in anticipation that the use of computer techniques will help to quantify some of these similarities. Vocabulary has been chosen as the initial point of comparison for a number of reasons. It has been noted that certain interesting or unusual words have already been found to recur in both, *A Looking Glace* and in the Whitford texts. A comparison of vocabulary used in the two sets of texts, therefore, suggests itself as a potentially fruitful line of inquiry. Spelling and sentence length do not lend themselves to comparison because neither in the case of *A Looking Glace* nor in Whitford's writings can one be certain that one has the author's original spelling and punctuation. In entering the texts on the computer, spelling has not been standardised in the eventuality that it does prove useful to the inquiry for other reasons.

The writings of another Syon author, William Bonde, have been chosen as a control body of texts. Bonde, author of the *Pylgrimage of perfection* and *A deuout epystle or treatise for them that ben* (8) tymorouse and fearefull in conscience, was a contemporary of Whitford's and is mentioned by Whitford in his writings. (9)

Initially, a programme has been written in SNOBOL to count occurrences of words in the three sets of texts. (10)

Although word counts and concordancing are fairly standard practices and can be done quite simply using the Oxford Concordance Programme (OCP), the author of this paper wished to use the opportunity to gain programming skills in order to have the flexibility to be able, at some further stage, to ask questions that did not necessarily mould themselves to suit the capabilities of available software packages.

The SNOBOL programme prints out the words of a text in alphabetical order together with their frequencies. After the initialisation statements, the programme reads the data and loads the words into a table. It then converts the table into an array and sorts it into alphabetical order. After various formatting statements, the programme prints the words and their frequencies in alphabetical order down the page but makes use of the full width of the page by arranging the words into four columns. The programme also contains an error message which it prints if the table is empty.

A preliminary run of this programme was made using the first page of *A Looking Glace for the Religious*. It examined 192 words and took 1.37 cpu seconds. The results that it produced were interesting and suggested that a full-scale examination of the three bodies of text may well confirm in a quantifiable form observations made using traditional and more subjective methods. In *A Looking Glace*, for instance, one gets the impression that the author is ever-conscious of his readers and is constantly addressing them in his mind. The preliminary run of the SNOBOL programme revealed that on the first page of *A Looking Glace*, the word that occurred the most frequently was »you« (14 occurrences). It was followed by »to« (11 occurrences), then »the« (9 occurrences), »and« (6 occurrences) and »of« (5 occurrences). Whitford's writings too leave the impression of his concern for his audience. It would be interesting if a full-scale computer examination of the texts were to confirm these observations. Statistical analysis of the data produced by the SNOBOL programme will be done, possibly using the MINITAB package.

At the completion of the project outlined above, the author of this paper should be in a better position to say something about the authorship of *A Looking Glace*. The results should reveal the extent to which the similarities noted above between Whitford and *A Looking Glace* can be quantified and whether the similarities between their vocabularies are significant. It is unlikely that the results will be able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Whitford was the author of *A Looking Glace*. They should, however, either increase or decrease the likelihood that the author of *A Looking Glace* was Richard Whitford.

If the results suggest that Whitford could well be the author of *A Looking Glace*, our perception of him as a writer would be greatly affected. Whitford is known to us through the works that are undeniably his as a writer of simple, down-to-earth devotional guides for the laity and for Bridgettine nuns. *A Looking Glace*, although a methodical work like all of Whitford's, has a tendency towards the mystical or the aesthetic that is not very noticeable in the authentic Whitford writings. We would have to re-evaluate Whitford as an author of considerably greater flexibility than has hitherto been thought and as a major English mystical writer of the late medieval period.

If the results suggest that Whitford did not write *A Looking Glace*, we are left with further questions. First of all, who did? *A Looking Glace* is undeniably an important work which had ties with Syon Abbey and which must have been written in the late Middle Ages. Can an author be identified? Finally, one is still left with the striking similarities between *A Looking Glace* and the writings of Richard Whitford, regardless of the identity of the true author. What do these similarities signify? Could they reflect the existence of a school of writing centred on Syon Abbey? Whatever the outcome of the project, the results will be thought-provoking.

Notes

1. LAWRENCE, V. *The Life and Writings of Richard Whitford* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, St. Andrews, 1987).
2. It is attributed to Whitford by GILLOW, J. in *A...bibliographical dictionary of the English Catholics* (London, 1885-1903), Vol. 5, p. 582.
3. Originally, it consisted of 124 pages but eight (pages 5-12) are missing.
4. Although this in itself does not help us to date the work. Treatises of a traditional nature continued to be written well into the seventeenth century. See, for instance, the writings of Augustine Baker.
5. Augmentation Office, *Miscellaneous Books (Monastic Pensions)*, CCLII, fo.xi.
6. WILLIAMS, G. »Two Neglected London-Welsh Clerics: Richard Whitford and Richard Gwent«, *The Transactions of the Honorable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1961), Part 1, p. 31.
7. Syon Ms. 18: *A Looking Glace for the Religious*, p. 121.
8. Note Bonde's use of the archaism »they ben«.
9. WHITFORD, Richard. *A dayly exercyse and experyence of dethc* (Wayland, 1537), E viib - E ixa. (Revised Short-Title Catalogue 25414).
10. It is based on a programme in HOCKEY, S. *SNOBOL: Programming for the Humanities* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 166-168 but amended to deal with longer texts.

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- , 1532. Here begynneth the boke called the Pyper, or tonne, of the lyfe of perfection. London. (RSTC 25421)
 - , 1537. A dayly exercyse and experyence of dethe. London. (RSTC 25414)
 - , 1537. A dialoge or comunicacion...For preparaci3n vnto howselynge. London. (RSTC 25413.5)
 - , 1537. A werke for housholders. London. (RSTC 25425)
 - , 1541. Here foloweth dyuers holy instrucionys and teachynges very necessarye for the helth of mannes soule. London. (RSTC 25420)
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